

Going on Here... By Bonnie Jernigan

SRO on Congress Street

Tales of a haunted tavern certainly add to the charm of the 1741 colonial cottage on Congress Street, currently known as the Sun Tavern. But the legend of the phoenix, rising from the ashes, seems a story more fitting for this spot, where restaurants have come and gone for years. Fiddler's Green... Goose Summer...the longer you've lived in Duxbury, the more names you remember.

Larry Friedman found the building in disrepair back in 1996, after former owners had "given up the ghost." He remembers standing in the pub section, where a fallen-in ceiling lay on the floor. He pictured a full room with people enjoying dinner, music and companionship.

Today Friedman owns Sun Tavern with his wife Carol. His vision of a packed house and pleased patrons has developed into a weekly reality. Who says there's nothing happening in Duxbury west of Route 3? I've got a soft spot for the place—more on that later—so I've been cheering for him all along. I'm thrilled at his success, even if it does mean having to wait a while for dinner.

On a typical Friday or Saturday night, the tables at Sun Tavern are filled and there is standing room only at the bar—don't go there if you're in a hurry. But the Sun Tavern isn't an experience you want to rush through. There's country-elegant ambience to absorb, an impressive wine list to explore, and on Friday nights, Mark Bellwood and Paul McWilliams serve up delectable old chestnuts on voice and piano.

Friedman contends that consistently good food is key to the continued survival in any restaurant, and chef Marilyn Brugoli's menu at the Sun Tavern strikes a fine balance. Diners can play it safe with traditional fare like filet mignon and bearnaise, or crab cake appetizers, while those with more adventuresome tastes can try more creative dishes like shrimp and scallop allegro, or polenta pancakes with sun-dried tomatoes. My husband and I dined from each end of that spectrum on a recent night out. The beef was extraordinary; tender and savory (even if it was a little beyond the rare I requested; nobody ever believes me). Friedman says Sun Tavern is the only restaurant on the South Shore to buy meat from Kineally Brothers, whom he regards as Boston's best beef distributor. The shrimp and scallops, served with snow peas atop angel hair, had the subtle blend of flavors and spices I usually associate with Asian food. The polenta, which I had as a first course, was my personal favorite. The starchy pancakes, drenched with a piquant sauce, combined homey comfort-food texture with a surprising zing.

If dependably delicious keep folks coming back again and again, it just might be the music that's luring them there in the first place. On Friday nights, there is a good sprinkling of familiar Duxbury faces. But Friedman finds that his crowds are coming from all over the place, perhaps in response to Bellwood's following, and good publicity from WPLM, a radio station where old chestnut jazz is a mainstay.

Standard favorites, made popular by the likes of Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett, are the songs Bellwood does best.

Three years ago, a professional grapevine of sorts linked Bellwood up with keyboard player Paul McWilliams, significant other to local jazz celebrity Rebecca Parris, who occasionally sits in and wows the crowd with a set or two. The Bellwood-McWilliams duo has taken hold, and the energy they create is perfectly suited to Sun Tavern. The small corner of the bar where they tuck in a keyboard and microphone becomes center stage. Songs seem like conversations, lyrics take on the ring of poetry, and it makes you want to linger and listen to more.

The Sun Tavern menu includes a fascinating little history which has a rather touching conclusion:

Couples have promised to be true to each other for life here; those whose worldly concerns no longer exist have been toasted here. The old building exudes a certain tenderness which has left a mark on a number of people.

Reading that passage left me with a haunted sense of familiarity. The old building has indeed left its mark on me. New to town and not yet affiliated with a local church or any other sort of group or place, I chose this spot for my wedding fourteen years ago. All our guests were charmed by the setting, and my husband and I often returned when we were feeling sentimental. We had dinner there with our parents the night we told them a baby was on the way. Saddened by the passing of a dear friend, we indeed felt drawn there to have a somber drink together. It broke our hearts to see the tavern empty for a time. In bringing this landmark back to life, with comfortable music and trusty cuisine, Larry Friedman has maintained a part of Duxbury's magic.

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